



# MORTON ARBORETUM

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## BULLETIN OF

## POPULAR INFORMATION

LISLE, ILLINOIS

### THE SMOKE TREES, (*COTINUS*); CHINESE SUMAC, (*RHUS CHINENSIS*)

Few shrubs still in favor today can trace their popularity back as far as the Smoke Bush or Smoke Tree, *Cotinus coggygia* (syn. *Rhus Cotinus*), which if one can rely on published records, has been known and admired for its midsummer "smoke" display for more than 2000 years. Pliny mentioned it in his writings and from Gerard's Herbal we learn of its use in England as early as 1597. Our own Colonial gardens featured it, too, both those of Massachusetts and Virginia.

A species widely distributed geographically, its range extending from Mid and South Europe east to the Himalayas and Central China, the Smoke Tree is an extremely adaptable plant, perfectly hardy here and without soil preferences. We have discovered that its floral display is more profuse in a lighter not too rich soil, however.

Shrubby in stature, in spite of the fact that it is commonly referred to as Smoke Tree, it is a broad, erect branched bush to 10 or sometimes 15 feet whose distinctive whorled foliage arrangement gives the plant its characteristic rounded compactness. The leaves themselves average between 1¼ and 3¼ inches in size, are smooth, oval shaped and usually broadest at or below the middle. They are rounded at the base and sometimes notched at the apex. Their bluish green summer coloring is enhanced by a slight bloom and the fall color change embraces a harmonious blending of orange, yellow and purple.

The "smoky" effect of the July borne fruiting panicles obviously overshadows *Cotinus coggygria's* other attractions, the thread-like inflorescences composing them passing through a colorful transition in their change from green to pale flesh color to purplish and gray. Ordinarily they appear in such abundance as to completely envelope the bush in a cloud of mist. This has given rise to such descriptive common names as Wig tree, Purple Fringe Tree, Burning-bush and Venetian Sumac. The latter name hints the plants' close relationship to the Sumacs, fellow members of the Cashew, (*Anacardiaceae*) Family.

Smoke tree bloom is polygamous, both unisexual and bisexual flowers occurring on the same plant. These May produced blossoms are very small, of inconspicuous yellow green coloring and borne in ample, loose terminal panicles branching from the axils of linear, leaf-like bracts.

Fruit is sparingly produced, one having to look carefully to find the little greenish-brown one sided drupes among the clustering threads of the feathery pedicels.

Several horticultural forms of the Smoke Tree are now in cultivation, variations competing with the type species for landscape interest. Among them may be mentioned *Cotinus coggygia* "Notcutt's Variety", an English clone whose larger foliage is of a rich claret shade. While the brightest color is confined to the new growth, it is present in sufficient quantity to give an outstanding all over effect, especially in bright sunlight. *Cotinus coggygia purpureus*, another variety, has in addition to plum colored young foliage, feathery fruiting panicles of the same purplish hue. Both remain effective for an extended period. "Royal Purple," a recent import from the Grootendorst nursery in Holland, is a newer "purpureus" selection with large, shiny metallic leaves of purplish black. Showiest of all, however, is *Cotinus Coggygia rubrifolia*, whose reddish purple foliage stands out as the deepest toned variety of any in the Arboretum collection. A reddish purple tinge is evident in its stems, too, as well as in the flower panicles. Smaller leaves uniform in both size and coloring are a characteristic which cannot be overlooked, and the bush has a pleasing undulating outline in spite of the compactness of the foliage masses clothing the erect stems.

It is the American Smoke Tree, *Cotinus americanus*, which justifies the genera's common name, for both in its native southeastern habitat and under cultivation it assumes arborescent stature. Thirty feet is its usual maximum and several Arboretum specimens are already approaching this height. They are all rather narrow headed trees with multiple trunks and grayish bark. The leaves are larger (2½-5 in.) than those of *Cotinus coggygia*, generally broadest above the middle and wedge shaped at the base. While the foliage is predominantly yellow green, older leaves show a bluish cast. An added color note is provided by the coppery tinge of the new growth and the pinkish red marking of the petioles. Autumn's advent brings forth the plant's major landscape attraction, however, the glorious foliage blending of yellow, orange and scarlet which replaces summer's green. The leaves of both this and the preceding species are aromatic, similar in fragrance to the pungently scented Fragrant Sumac.

Little need be said of the American Smoke Tree's flowers, the panicles being not only smaller but much less abundant. The staminate (male) and pistillate (female) blossoms occur on separate plants.

In view of the singular interest evident in the Smoke Tree's seemingly studied irregularity of outline both species are desirable as landscape specimens. This does not mean they cannot be combined with other trees and shrubs to equal advantage in backgrounds, screen plantings, etc.

#### CHINESE SUMAC, *RHUS CHINENSIS* (syn. *R. JAVANICA*)

Showy late summer blossom, the attraction always emphasized as the most outstanding landscape feature of the Chinese Sumac, should not be considered its sole claim to recognition, for we have also found it an ornamental plant in fruit as well as a fall foliage color subject of more than ordinary interest.



The several specimens comprising the Arboretum collection are all large shrubs (10-12 ft.) consisting of numerous stems rising from a common base and extending upward and outward to form a symmetrically rounded top. In its native oriental habitat, China, Japan and other parts of South Asia, we learn it grows taller, often reaching small tree (25 ft.) size.

Luxuriant thick leathery foliage, typically Sumac in appearance, though marked by a pronounced winged rachis (center petiole), adds considerably to the Chinese Sumac's summer charm. Only one other hardy species, our native Shining Sumac, *Rhus copallina*, displays a similar appendage on its leaf stems. Leaves average a foot or more in total length and consist of from 7 to 13 dark green leaflets marked with lighter, soft pubescent undersurfaces. Their autumnal color change, upholding the reputation of the genus, provides a creditable showing of orange red. The small fruits of the same color are effective simultaneously.

Considering the flowers, which reputedly outrival all other Sumacs in beauty, it may be said that although very small individually, they open to creamy blooms gracefully massed in good looking 8 to 10 inch panicles. Even in the green bud stage one will note a marked daintiness in their make up.

E. L. Kammerer



Chinese Sumac, *Rhus Chinensis* (Mill.), in the Arboretum Chinese Group.



Smoke Tree, *Cotinus Coggygia* (Scop.), in its most attractive smoky stage.

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